# China’s race for intelligent driving technology shifts focus to safety after fatal crash



The pursuit of advanced driver-assistance systems (ADAS) has become a central focus in China's highly competitive automobile market, driving rapid technological progress and intense rivalry among manufacturers. These intelligent driving features, which assist with tasks from cruise control to collision avoidance, represent a significant area of investment, especially in China—the world's largest car market characterised by a youthful and tech-savvy customer base.

According to a recent report by consultancy AlixPartners, nearly 60 percent of vehicles sold in China last year were equipped with level-two or higher ADAS features. Level two indicates continuous driver assistance while keeping the human driver in control. The consultancy’s expert Yvette Zhang described such features as emerging "as a key competitive tool" in the industry.

Giovanni Lanfranchi of the electric vehicle firm Zeekr illustrated the shift in consumer priorities: "Ten years ago, only 15 percent of customers said they would change car because of an intelligent cockpit—today it's 54 percent."

Amidst this environment, companies are deploying various strategies, with some developing proprietary technology—as seen with start-ups like Xpeng and electronics giant-turned-car manufacturer Xiaomi—while others partner with tech titans such as Huawei. The race is global, with significant efforts underway in Europe and North America as well. Nonetheless, two-thirds of auto executives surveyed worldwide by AlixPartners believe China leads the world in intelligent driving technology, citing strong capabilities in data collection, processing, and access to software and machine-learning talent.

However, the fervour to lead the market has come with challenges. A fatal crash in March involving a Xiaomi SU7 operating in assisted driving mode brought crucial concerns about safety and marketing claims to the fore. The incident resulted in the deaths of three college students, triggering scrutiny over how these systems are advertised, especially regarding the portrayal of cars as capable of "autonomous driving." The problem is not confined to China: Tesla’s "Full Self-Driving" feature, available in the United States, is officially expected to be used only with driver supervision.

Tom Nunlist, associate director for tech and data policy at the consultancy Trivium China, commented to AFP, "The price war has just been so brutal, companies are desperate to find any way to set themselves apart. So the question is, have they been over-promising on features and releasing things as quickly as possible, for the purposes of fighting this commercial battle."

Following the Xiaomi accident, China’s Ministry of Industry and Information Technology convened a meeting with key automakers, issuing clear directives for stricter safety enforcement. The ministry emphasised the need for rigorous testing, clearer definition of system functional boundaries, and strongly cautioned against exaggerated or misleading advertising about autonomous capabilities. It was also reported that authorities will tighten controls on over-the-air software updates that enhance ADAS features remotely.

This regulatory intervention has notably shifted industry focus, as seen during the Auto Shanghai show last week. According to Paul Gong from UBS, "in a sharp U-turn from just two months ago, carmakers have taken a low profile in terms of autonomous driving functions, but are emphasising safety instead." A prominent sign at BYD’s exhibition declared, "Safety is the ultimate premium of new energy vehicles." Meanwhile, the Xiaomi booth showcased details concerning the SU7’s chassis, hardware, and colour options, but made no mention of ADAS technology.

Zhang Yu, managing director at Shanghai consultancy Automotive Foresight, shared with AFP that the recent tragedy is "only a setback in marketing terms, which is helpful for a healthy development" of intelligent driving systems. He clarified: "This accident was not related to tech or the system itself; it more concerns the ignorance of ADAS and boundary of autonomous driving."

Despite the current pause in aggressive marketing, the technological advancement of ADAS continues. Nunlist noted, "That's why this is becoming a pressing issue because car companies are going to be wanting to release these features." However, he cautioned that a fully autonomous vehicle—classified as level five autonomy—is "certainly not imminent," predicting significant challenges remain in solving complex "last-mile problems."

In summary, China's automotive market stands at a crossroads where commercial enthusiasm for intelligent driving technology is being recalibrated to prioritise safety and regulatory compliance, following incidents that have highlighted the risks associated with premature claims of autonomy. The evolution of these systems thus remains under close observation, as manufacturers balance innovation, competition, and safety obligations.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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